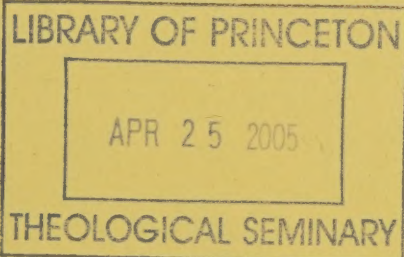
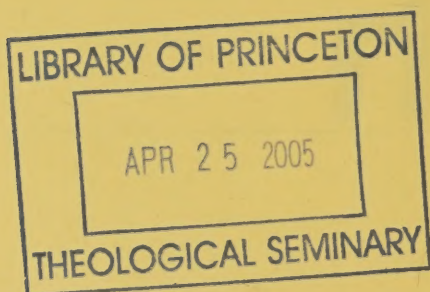


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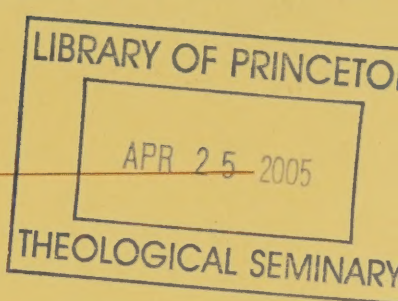




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basics of the christian faith

John Stevens Kerr



Some of us have come to speak of people who cope and adjust well to life as "having their heads together." The process of making sense out of life is frequently called "putting it together."

The idea of wanting things to hang together expresses a longing that most of us have today, and suggests, somewhat painfully, that much of the world as we see it is not together. Of course, those who enjoy dwelling on the wisdom of the ages like to comment that people never were together; in every era, there have been forces pulling people apart, and conflicting loyalties have commanded their allegiance. Others, who prefer more recent causes for the world's troubles point out that this distress is the product of our complex times. Thus it is that, in our language, we have found ways to describe this sense of not being real and complete when we talk about anxiety, stress, the "blahs with life," frustration, depression, purposelessness, not knowing who we are, and such matters.

Finding Meaning in Life

By whatever name, whether intense or merely an uneasy shadow over our life, this sense of incompleteness and fragmentation disturbs us. We sense that life should be more than this. Rather than a slide show of scattered still photos, it should be a motion picture, with sound, drama, and the whole range of human feelings. Life should begin somewhere with meaning, have a glorious and rich middle, and come to a satisfying end.

"By whatever name, whether intense or merely an uneasy shadow over our life, any sense of incompleteness and fragmentation disturbs us."

Our times offer a multitude of cures for our fragmented and confused existence. Group therapy, personal encounters, return to nature, sexual adventures, conquering our "inner space" by means of transcendental meditation are only a few of the more recent offerings. A few years ago, we had to content ourselves with more traditional cures such as politics, family togetherness, optimism, or success.

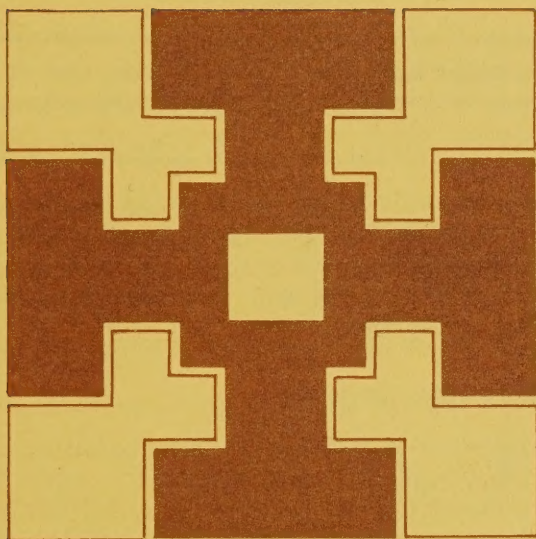
All of these things, when elevated to the level of a cause on which we try to build our lives, have something in common. They become the glue which holds us together. They cement the scattered pieces of our lives into a coherent whole.

They are, in short, beliefs to which we commit ourselves, ideas on which we build our lives and our sense of values. The strange thing is that these belief systems have the tendency to work, at least on the surface. They can indeed keep our Humpty Dumpty existence together. Apparently it doesn't matter so much what you believe, just so you believe it strongly enough to keep from coming unglued.

Does It Matter What You Believe?

Psychologists have become very interested in stress lately. In their studies, they have explored human behavior under conditions of extreme stress, when most people come apart at the seams. One such situation was the infamous concentration camps of World War II. In interviewing survivors, researchers discovered a remarkable fact. Communists and Jehovah's Witnesses both managed to preserve their personalities intact despite the brutal degradation and fantastic stress of the camp horrors. It is doubtful that two belief systems could differ as much as Communism and Jehovah's Witnesses, yet both did the job of keeping people together.

On the surface, then, it would seem that it doesn't matter what you believe, just so you believe it with enough passion to build



your life around it. And, from a psychological point of view, it doesn't matter what those beliefs are.

But from another viewpoint, it does. We might call this the artistic or, to use a more exotic term, the esthetic view. Since the commitment of our life is probably the most precious thing we have, we don't want to toss it away lightly. If Belief X is as good as Belief Y, as far as giving us something on which to hang our ego, the two may not be equally valid deep down inside. We would prefer our beliefs to be as complete, as harmonious, as well composed, as beautiful as a rich painting.

Judging the inner beauty of a belief is probably open to as much difference of opinion as judgments about a painting. Tastes differ. Some like the work of old masters simply because they are old,

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while others gravitate toward the latest and newest painter to illuminate the world of art. But, just as there are some general principles which separate good art from bad art, so we might agree that there are some broad standards which separate worthy beliefs from the less worthy ones.

Asking Some Basic Questions

As a starting point, we can ask some basic questions about our beliefs. Are they true? Do they help explain all of life? Do they offer hope and promise? Can they be trusted? Any beliefs which meet all four of these questions with a bold "Yes!" would be worthy of our most precious commitment.

Is It True?

Let's start off with the most controversial, "Is it true?" When judging beliefs, this question is much like the one asked by critics when judging whether or not a painting or sculpture should look like the real thing. Some, of course, will say that it should; that is the real truth about art. Others, however, point to an abstract work and declare that it represents a deeper truth. It's possible, therefore, to argue that truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

The fact is that once we leave the realm of science, truth becomes more fuzzy. It's not all that clear in science, but there, at least, we have some accepted, agreed upon standards for judging truth. Outside of science, we have to rely upon two very old, but well tested, yardsticks for truth: Does the belief agree with things as they really are? Does the belief have some internal consistency and coherence so that it forms a satisfying whole?

Believers in Christianity have made their own references to the truth for nearly two thousand years, which doesn't prove very

much to the skeptic. Most people want to cross the t's and dot the i's, getting down to the facts. Did God create the world? Did Jesus really live? Is heaven a real place? And what these questions all boil down to is this: Can any belief suited to a world twenty centuries ago make sense in a modern age of four-dimensional space?

Unfortunately, if Christianity is true at all, its truth will not be found by getting answers to questions like the ones above, even if they could be answered. Like the abstract painting, Christianity has a deeper truth, one that lies beneath the surface.

The two measures of agreement with reality and internal coherence help get a handle on this deeper level of truth. Let's look at each of these measures.

What is the reality against which we can check the truth of Christianity? Since no one can prove that the Christian idea of God is true, or that Jesus actually lived exactly as the records have it, we must be talking about a different reality. And the reality against which we measure the truth of Christianity is life itself.

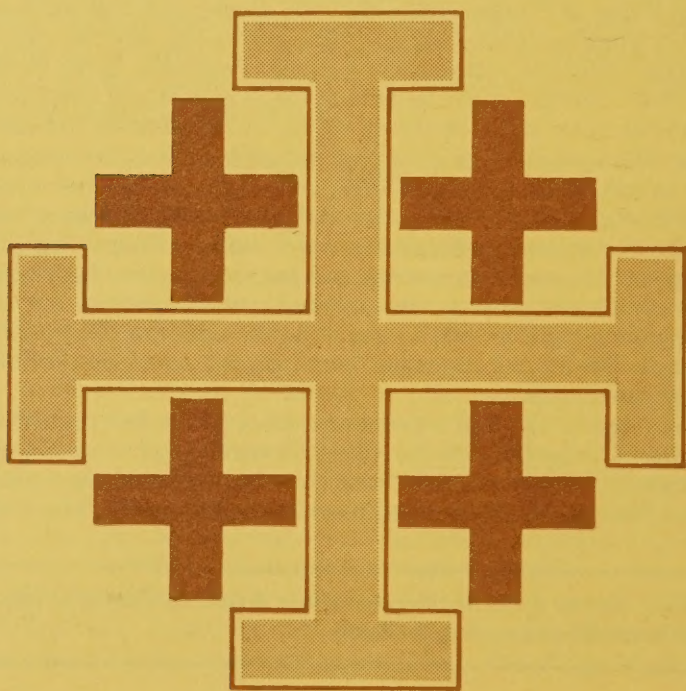
If the Christian understanding of life, if its message about what God has done and is doing for us, fits our experience, we call it true. This is much more subjective and personal than the measures we usually think of in connection with truth, and for that reason some people have trouble with it. But when we think about it, most of the deeply personal truths by which we live—our values, our sense of love—all become true and precious to us on the basis of our experience. In fact, these personal truths dominate our life. Very few people will die for the objective truth that $2+2=4$, but many will risk death for justice, honor, politics, and love—all very subjective things.

The test of internal coherence relates to the test against the reality of experience. If the Christian message consistently and completely provides a vision of life which provides us with an understanding of many different and complex areas of life, it will

"One never gets at any possible truth in Christianity without first coming in faith."

meet this test as far as we are concerned. Like the test of reality, this one is also subjective and depends upon experience.

So to the first question about a belief — “Is it true?” We find that the answer comes after the fact. We can’t know until we experience it; we can’t test its truth until it becomes part of our life. Many have tried the Christian faith and decided it was not true for them. Doubtless, the faithful lament this, for they are convinced it is true for themselves. But no one can believe for someone else. The truth of a belief is inside us, a part of the fabric of our existence. When Christians speak of faith, part of what they mean points to this inner quality of truth. They are embarking on a way of life which can’t be proven in advance, but only tested as they go along. At the start, it is like moving into a dark room; hopefully, the Christian eventually finds a light switch and things become more clear. But faith is always a venture into the unknown, a step toward



a promise, a life that says, "I hope it is so." One never gets at any possible truth in Christianity without first coming in faith.

Does Christianity Explain All of Life?

Whether Christianity meets the test of truth can't be decided in advance of one's venture on its way. How about the second question, "Does Christianity explain all of life?"

Really adequate beliefs embrace all of our life. They give us a point of view which helps us understand where we came from, why we are here, what is happening to us, and where we are going. They are broadly satisfying in that they give us handles on a lot of the questions we are asking. That is why beliefs help cement us together and keep us whole; they provide one overall attitude toward life, however diverse and confused that life may become.

Christianity offers this kind of comprehensive view of life. That doesn't mean it has a detailed answer for every critical problem, but it does help us interpret a variety of problems we face. It offers a framework for understanding who we are. It gives us insight into why we are here. It illuminates for us the qualities of personal relationships. It helps us grasp what is happening in the world around us. It identifies our limits while opening us to new possibilities.

Christianity certainly isn't the only comprehensive belief around. There are many others, and all have their enthusiastic adherents. Some of them are secular. That is, they make do without God. But for the person who senses that his or her stress and fragmentation stems precisely from this world, the hope that God might fit all pieces together lingers deep inside. If God exists, then surely an all-embracing belief must take his existence into account. And so the realm of religion becomes inviting.

Again, we come to an act of faith. To venture out in the hope or possibility that God is alive and well and still active in the world is an act of faith. Such a venture is sometimes called "the leap of faith." It means that you gamble your inner conviction, your life,

"To venture out in the hope or possibility that God is alive and well and still active is an act of faith."

on the notion that if you do leap into Christianity, God is indeed there to catch you. But you can't tell before the leap. You can hear others who have taken that leap say that God is there, but for yourself you can discover it only when you yourself have taken the plunge.

Many people view Christianity as a philosophy of life, a series of principles which explain the unexplainable and give rich meaning to their experiences in life. But this falls short of the facts. Christianity is so comprehensive that it embraces our faith, and our risk. More than principles on paper, it is a leap into a personal relationship with the God who creates, sustains, and loves everything he has made—including us. Faith embraces the mind, but it also encompasses the whole person; it is a relationship more than it is an idea.

Now all of this may be too all-encompassing for some who prefer to reserve part of their lives for themselves. Certainly Christians have trouble with this. They constantly struggle with the wholeness of life which God demands. So if we seek wholeness, and it forever seems beyond our grasp, is it because we haven't gone to the source, to God in whom all things are held together? The only way to find out requires that "leap of faith."

Does It Offer Hope and Promise?

The third question about a belief is, "Does it offer hope and promise?" Here, more clearly than before, Christianity shines forth affirmatively.

Hope and promise are at the core of Christianity. The Christian message is called *gospel*, a term that means "good news." From the first moment it emerged on the world scene, Christianity proclaimed hope and promise, good news to people caught in the whirlpool of confusion and hopelessness.

What makes Christianity, then, different from other hopeful and optimistic views of life? The difference is very sharp, so sharp indeed, that for some it has become an offense: God himself enters

"Hope and promise are the core of Christianity."

“Christianity sees God at work for renewal in many places, but it finds the focus of God’s love most clearly in Jesus Christ.”

into human life to rescue it, change it, and turn it around. Christianity sees God at work for renewal in many places, but chiefly it finds the focus of God’s love most clearly in Jesus Christ. A number of words are used to describe what God is doing in Jesus Christ: *redemption, forgiveness, salvation, atonement*. They are special words of the Christian movement, all of which tell part of the story, and none of which tell it all. Yet, even if the fulness of what God is doing remains obscure and beyond human understanding, enough is clear to give confidence, hope, and promise: God himself is at work actively on our behalf.

If this is so—and until we take the leap of faith we shall not be certain—then our entire life takes on fresh meaning and new possibilities.

Consider one situation by way of illustration. Bill Hartley felt all that fragmentation, incompleteness, and lack of wholeness that we have been mentioning. Here’s how he described it: “At work, I owe my allegiance to the corporation, and they want a lot, but that’s what they pay me for, right? But I feel guilty most of the time, because I know my job is taking me away from my family. Sometimes I will be gone for two weeks at a time and then come home so worn out I really don’t want to talk to anyone for a day or so, and the family hugs me and welcomes me and I really want to pull away and run. That’s terrible, isn’t it? But it’s me, though I don’t know what it means.”

“I feel torn apart by all the responsibilities I know I should take seriously. Why can’t I get a set of priorities I can live with? Whenever I try to put first things first, I feel guilty about everything I shoved into second place.”

Bill feels the rip one way, and it may not be your way, but you get the idea. How can Christianity help answer his questions? Can it offer hope and promise?

In a world where there are few sure-fire guarantees, the answer to that question is “Yes.” Christianity can offer hope. For instance, Bill seems to feel that he has to justify himself all the time—to his

bosses, to his family, to his community, and even to himself. He is on the treadmill of proving he is worthy. Whether Bill would call himself religious or not, deep down he is unconsciously trying to justify himself before a higher power.

And try as he might, he fails. Guilt—the nagging reminder that his justification isn't complete—creeps into the crevices of his life, casting a dark stain over all he does and feels.

Christianity claims that God, through his grace, is at work to renew us. Basically, grace means that we do not have to justify ourselves before God. God, in his love, has declared us good; he takes us as we are; he forgives and makes us whole. If God has lifted the burden of self-justification from us, then we have a firm basis for dealing with our guilt: we need no longer justify ourselves before others. We are free to be ourselves, as God intended, walking upright without the yoke of unnecessary guilt bending our shoulders.

This, naturally, isn't guaranteed. Bill could be a life-long Christian and still feel tormented by the demands of self-justification. Lots of Christians are. But if the hope is there, and if we really believe that God is the source of our life and he doesn't demand from us but gives to us a new freedom, then we have the fresh possibility of redirecting our life and letting our relationship with God permeate every other relationship we have. The power of God, Christianity asserts, comes when a person of faith immerses all of his or her life in that faith. Going to church takes one hour on Sunday; what about the other one hundred and sixty-seven hours in the week? Spending those hours in the awareness of the grace of God, his hope and promise, is what Christianity means when it talks about “growth in faith.”

Can I Trust It?

This is a good place to broach the fourth question, “Can I trust it?” So far, we have seen how little Christianity can guarantee in

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“Faith has its ups and downs, its rich moments and its sterile times, like any other relationship of trust.”

specific terms. Apparently God got started before warranties and money-back guarantees became the norm. If one wants advance assurances before letting go in trust, Christianity cannot meet the demand.

But if we look at the word *faith*, we might get a different perspective. We have seen that faith involves a risk, some kind of venturing into the unknown. We have seen that it is private, buried inside us and cannot be borrowed from someone else. We have seen that faith involves a relationship with God, and from that basic connection, a renewed relationship with others around us.

Faith also means trust. It is trust in God's love and grace, and believing that he works on our behalf—not trust in self, which is something else, but a fundamental trust in God.

So the question of having trust in Christianity comes down to this: “Can I have trust in what Christianity says God is doing for me? Can I trust such a God with something so precious as myself?”

Only you can answer that question. Faith, being trust, grows and develops. Perhaps you will never have a final answer, if that final answer means knowing how far you can trust God. Faith has its ups and downs, its rich moments and its sterile times, like any other relationship of trust.

But a belief that is built on faith and trust, so congenial to the human spirit, so open to growth and development, so intimately personal with a personal God, survives the ups and downs of human nature with more endurance than beliefs that capture only the mind or the passions.

We said that almost any full-blown belief will serve the purpose of keeping us together if we really adopt it as the center of our lives and values. Yet of all the options before us, only a few commend themselves to us as live possibilities. Most leave something out or throw up roadblocks to the complete commitment required. Christianity is, for millions, one of the live options; perhaps it is for you.

There is one main difference, however, between Christianity and other beliefs, of which we should all be aware. Looking for something to build our lives on, we do a little shopping, asking of

every belief, "What's in it for me? What can I get out of it?" Soon we discover that Christianity isn't so much a religion you can "get something out of" but a living relationship in which something is given to us. It's the subtle difference between having to glean the wheat fields yourself and having the fresh, warm bread served at your table. Really to be involved in it, you must be a good receiver as much as a giver.

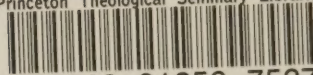
Receiving something freely, without condition or price, sounds marvelous, but the way we are put together this becomes one of the hardest things to do. When we do open up, however, it is the most marvelous experience of all: being free to receive love and grace, without demands or requirements.

Where Does That Leave Us?

Of the four questions we have asked of Christianity, it soon becomes apparent that we have a couple of qualified "Yesses," and a couple of firmer "Yesses." That's the best we can do for starters. But after that "leap of faith," the answers to all four questions can become a resounding, cosmic, beautiful chorus of "Yes!" The invitation to the Christian way is an invitation to put it all together in faith. And God, through his son, Jesus Christ, extends the invitation to you.



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